

The Story of Mary Draper Ingles

Most of what is known about Mary Draper Ingles' escape from Indian captivity comes from a narrative account of the Ingles family written by Mary's son, Colonel John Ingles, about a decade after her death. Mary often recounted her experiences to John and her other children, as well as her grandchildren.

Mary Draper was 18 years old when she married 21-year-old, William Ingles in 1750. They set up housekeeping near their parents in a place called Draper's Meadows, a small settlement in Augusta County, Virginia.

When the Ingles and Drapers came to Augusta County, relations with the Indians were relatively peaceful. John Ingles tells us that the Shawnee, from north of the Ohio River, would pass by Draper's Meadows in their raids against the Catawba to the South, but at that time there were only a few incidents on the Virginia frontier; this was soon to change.

On Wednesday the 30th of July 1755, the Shawnee attacked Draper's Meadows. It has been called a massacre, but an account compiled some time after the event reads: *1755, July 30th, Col. James Patton, at North River, killed; Casper Barrier, at North river, killed; Mrs. Draper and one child, at North River, killed; James Cull, at North River, wounded; Mrs. English and her children, at North River, prisoners escaped; Mrs. Draper, Jr., at North River, prisoner escaped; Henry Leonard, at North River, prisoner escaped.*

The prisoners included Mary Ingles, her two children, Thomas and George, and her sister-in-law, Bettie. Mary's mother was killed during the attack. William, Mary's husband, was away at the time and was not captured.

After the capture, the Shawnee headed for the Ohio River and the Shawnee town of Sonnontio. On the journey, Mary was allowed to roam the woods for wild comfrey to dress the gunshot wound that Bettie Draper received during the raid. Mary had numerous opportunities to escape and try to make her way home, but "could not think of leaving her children."

Sonnontio, or Sonhioto, usually called *Lower Shawnee Town* by the English traders, was located at the mouth of the Scioto River. It was built around 1738 and was part of a large network of Shawnee villages in the Ohio valley. In 1750, the population may have been as high as 1500 people, with 100 houses north of the river and another 40 on the Kentucky side.

When they reached the town, the two boys were taken from Mary and adopted into the tribe. Mary was given the task of sewing shirts for the Indians. Some weeks later she was taken to Big Bone Lick, more than 100 miles west, to help in salt making. Salt making was not easy work and certainly was not meant to make captives comfortable.

On around the 19th of October, Mary decided to escape from Big Bone Lick. John Ingles gives the following reason for her decision:

"My mother, being so distressed in being separated from her children, and her situation such a disagreeable one, that she came to the determined resolution that she would leave them and try to get home, or die in the woods, and prevailed upon an old Dutch woman that was there and a prisoner too, to engage with her in the seemingly hopeless and daring attempt."

Mary and another captive, a German woman, decided to make their escape together. They would later be separated. They did not have long to prepare. The narrative states that they had between them a blanket and tomahawk each, "*and perhaps a knife,*" and that they started late in the day. Given the isolated and wild nature of Big Bone Lick escape was not considered likely and there was no surveillance of the captives. The two women left camp under the ruse of gathering nuts and grapes, having traded a dull tomahawk for a sharp one with a Frenchman who was sitting on a large bone cracking walnuts. It is likely that when the Shawnee noticed the disappearance of the women they assumed they had perished in the wilderness which was full of hazards and predators.

Although it's not certain, it seems most likely that they headed immediately for the mouth of Landing Creek (or Little Gunpowder), the closet access to the Ohio River and the first of the 145 creek and river crossings on their way to the mouth of the Kanawha River, 250 miles up the Ohio. According to the narrative, they survived on "*black walnuts, grapes, paw paws, etc.*", and that often they were so hungry they would "*dig up roots and eat that they knew nothing of.*"

A letter written by an unnamed correspondent from Augusta County and printed in the newspaper after their return says that once, they came upon an Indian skinning a deer. His dog barked at them and the Indian fled as soon as he secured the hide. They were able to eat their fill of meat, and carry some with them to eat later.

Mary and the German woman likely walked up to 20 miles per day depending on the difficulty of the terrain and the depth of creeks and rivers.

They probably reached the Kanawha, a little more than half of their journey, around the 7th of November. From there, it was 95 miles and 46 stream crossings to the Falls of Kanawha; then up the New River for an additional 85-90 miles of the most rugged and difficult terrain they had to pass. About 40-50 miles from Mary's home in Draper's Meadow the two women separated and Mary continued on alone. The entire journey of about 500 miles took 43 days. Mary arrived home near the first of December, having survived incredible hardships.

Not long after reuniting with her husband, William, Mary and her family moved to a new location near what is now Radford, Virginia. After her journey, Mary lived a long and healthy life, and had several more children, dying in 1815 at the age of 82 or 83. Only one of her 2 children taken captive during the attack in 1755 was recovered and returned to the family at age seventeen.

References:

Mary Ingles and the Escape from Big Bone Lick by James Duvall, Boone County Public Library, Burlington, Kentucky 2009

Escape from Indian Captivity the Story Mary Draper Ingles and son Thomas Ingles as Told by John Ingles, Sr. Edited by Roberta Ingles Steele and Andrew Lewis Ingles 1969